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ABSTRACT

This brief highlights the benefits of work-based learning for students with disabilities, what constitutes quality work-based learning, and selected evidence-based models of work-based learning. Benefits to students include providing them with the opportunity to identify career interests, skills, and abilities, explore career goals, develop employability skills, and gain work experience. Characteristics of quality work-based programs are listed and include clear program goals; clear roles and responsibilities for work site supervisors, mentors, teachers, support personnel, and other partners; training plans that specify learning goals tailored to individual students with specific outcomes connected to student learning; convenient links among students, schools, and employers; on-the-job learning; range of work-based learning opportunities; mentor(s) at work site; clear expectations and feedback to assess progress toward goals; assessments to identify skills, interests, and support needs; reinforcement of work-based learning outside of work; and appropriate academic, social, and administrative support for students, employers, and all partners. Successful models of work-based learning programs are highlighted, including the "High School/High Tech" model and the "Bridges... from School to Work" program. The issue concludes with a list of basic responsibilities of students, teachers, and employers that contribute to the effectiveness of work-based learning experiences. (Contains 13 references.) (CR)

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NCSET Issue Brief

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Issue Brief

Examining Current Challenges in Secondary Education and Transition

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition

Creating Opportunities for Youth With Disabilities to Achieve Successful Futures

A partnership of —

Institute on Community Integration, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota

National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Education Supports (RRTC), University of Hawai'i at Manoa

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Quality Work-Based Learning and Postschool Employment Success

By Richard Luecking and Meredith Gramlich

The Problem

Many students with disabilities continue to struggle to successfully make the transition from school to employment. Despite advances in employment rates for students with disabilities who have exited school, their employment rates still lag significantly behind their nondisabled peers (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). For decades, research has shown the strong relationship between work experience during secondary school and postschool employment for youth with disabilities (Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997; Colley & Jamison, 1998; Hasazi, Gordan, & Roe, 1985). However, as the continuing disappointing postschool employment rates for youth with disabilities suggest, there remains a critical need to expand work-based learning opportunities for these youth and to integrate these experiences into secondary education. This brief highlights the benefits of work-based learning, what constitutes quality work-based learning, and selected evidence-based models of work-based learning.

Benefits of Work-Based Learning

Work-based learning has been shown to improve students' self-esteem, to teach and reinforce basic academic and technical skills, to promote an understanding of workplace culture and expectations, and to develop a network for future job searches (Bailey & Hughes, 1999; Hoerner & Wehrley, 1995; Wehman, 2001). Such experiences also serve to expose students to work and career options that would otherwise be unknown to them. This is especially critical to youth with disabilities for whom the exposure to the range of career options is often very limited. Further, these experiences serve as opportunities to identify the particular workplace supports that youth with disabilities may require as they pursue later employment and career prospects (Hughes & Carter, 2000).

Examples of work-based learning include: a planned program of job training and work experiences such as job shadowing, informational interviews, and workplace tours; workplace mentoring; and work experience including apprenticeships, volunteer work, service learning, school-based enterprises, on-the-job training, and paid employment. Each of these may contribute to the career development, career choice, and career success of individuals with disabilities (Benz & Lindstrom, 1997). There is a strong relationship between paid work experience during high school and postschool job success (Colley & Jamison, 1998; Luecking & Fabian, 2000). There is, then, an obvious benefit to all youth

Table 1. **Benefits of Work-Based Learning**

Students who participate in work-based learning can benefit by having the opportunity to:

- Identify career interests, skills, and abilities;
- Explore career goals;
- Identify on-the-job support needs;
- Develop employability skills and good work habits;
- Gain an understanding of employer expectations;
- Develop an understanding of the link between school and work;
- Gain work experience, generally connected to a specific job function; and
- Develop an understanding of the workplace and the connection between learning and earning.

with disabilities who participate in a range of work-based experiences throughout the secondary school years, especially when paid jobs are featured as educational adjuncts. **Table 1** summarizes research-supported benefits associated with work-based learning.

Quality Work-Based Learning

In order to ensure that students with disabilities get the maximum benefit from their work-based learning experiences, there are several factors that require consideration. Among these are connections between job and school-based learning, clear expectations of student activity at the workplace, clearly defined roles of teachers and worksite supervisors, and well-structured feedback on student performance. It is additionally important for students with disabilities to have appropriate supports and accommodations in place (Benz, et al., 1997). Providing training and technical assistance for workplace personnel is also an important feature of creating a welcoming and supportive environment in which students can thrive. **Table 2** summarizes characteristics of quality work-based programs that are supported by research (Benz & Lindstrom, 1997; Haimson & Bellotti, 2001; Hamilton & Hamilton, 1997; Hoerner & Wehrley, 1995).

Models That Work

There are a host of models throughout the country that feature successful implementation of work-based learning. Two widely replicated models that represent many of the features identified above are the *High School/High Tech* model and the *Bridges... From School to Work* program.

High School/High Tech was originally developed by the former President's Committee for Employment of People With Disabilities as a way of encouraging careers in technology fields in which people with disabilities are underrepresented. It features opportunities for secondary-aged youth with disabilities to spend time (through visits, job shadowing, internships, and/or paid employment) at participating high-tech companies and workplaces. These experiences, coordinated by designated staff, are accompanied by support at the workplace and in the classroom. Reports from companies that have participat-

Table 2. **Quality Work-Based Learning Characteristics**

- Clear program goals;
- Clear roles and responsibilities for worksite supervisors, mentors, teachers, support personnel, and other partners;
- Training plans that specify learning goals tailored to individual students with specific outcomes connected to student learning;
- Convenient links between students, schools, and employers;
- On-the-job learning;
- Range of work-based learning opportunities, especially those outside traditional youth employing industries (e.g., restaurants);
- Mentor(s) at the worksite;
- Clear expectations and feedback to assess progress toward achieving goals;
- Assessments to identify skills, interests, and support needs at the worksite;
- Reinforcement of work-based learning outside of work; and
- Appropriate academic, social, and administrative support for students, employers, and all partners.

ed and from professionals who have facilitated these experiences demonstrate the eventual career success of youth who have participated (Mundy, in press).

Bridges...From School to Work, developed by the Marriott Foundation for People With Disabilities, created paid internships in local companies for youth with disabilities who are in their last year in high school. The program features standardized pre-internship orientation for participants and internship placement support by designated staff. Serving the entire spectrum of special education students, the program boasts a typical placement rate of almost 90%, regardless of primary disability label, gender, and race of the participants. Follow-up studies of participants also demonstrate a high rate of postschool employment among the participants (Luecking & Fabian, 2000).

Improving the Quality and Availability of Work-Based Learning

Positive public perceptions of work-based learning, better connections to employers, and integration with school learning are necessary for wider adoption and implementation of quality work-based learning for students receiving special education services. First, there is often tension between time at the worksite and time in the classroom because of the concern that time away from classroom learning will negatively impact academic success. Thus, work-based learning will need to be seen as academically rigorous to be more widely supported by parents and educators (Bailey & Hughes, 1999; Haimson & Bellotti, 2001).

Second, school personnel often struggle to find time to establish and maintain relationships with participating employers. Employers, for their part, require convenient ways to link with students. Thus, mechanisms for linking students with employers will need to be created and/or expanded in most school systems (Benz, et al., 1997). Potential resources for facilitating such links include youth employment programs funded by the Workforce Investment Act. In many communities these programs often create work experiences for a range of youth, including those with disabilities. Also, disability specific resources, such as those funded by state vocational rehabilitation agencies, are important pre-graduation links to jobs and work experiences that lead to eventual successful adult employment.

Finally, work-based learning and academic coursework need to be integrated to allow students to understand the value and application of their education and experience (Bailey & Hughes, 1999; Benz, et al., 1997; Hamilton & Hamilton, 1997). Work-based learning can contribute to a student's overall academic development through journal-writing, formalized training plans, participation in internship seminars or classes for debriefing, planned learning experiences at work, and final reports or presentations. **Table 3** provides a list of basic responsibilities of students, teachers, and employers that contribute to the effectiveness of work-based learning experiences.

Conclusion

Research has consistently demonstrated that education and employment outcomes for youth with disabilities can be significantly improved by frequent and systematic exposure to a variety of real work experiences. The persistently low employment rates of youth and young adults with disabilities suggest that these types of experiences should be integral to secondary education for students with disabilities, regardless of the nature of the disability or the need for special education services. This brief provides a rationale for work-based learning, indicators of quality for such experiences, and examples of work-based learning models that have proven effective in boosting the career development of youth with disabilities.

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Table 3. **Shared Responsibility for Work-Based Learning Success**

Student Responsibility in Work-Based Learning

- Perform job responsibilities
- Communicate needs and suggest support strategies
- Follow-through on commitments
- Adhere to workplace guidelines and procedures
- Comply with expectations for job performance, behavior, and social interactions
- Show respect, be responsible, and follow through on commitments
- Learn as much as possible about the work environment and the job

Teacher Responsibility in Work-Based Learning

- Orient students to the workplace
- Orient students to their roles and responsibilities
- Communicate expectations for job performance, behavior, and social interactions
- Explain consequences for inappropriate behavior
- Orient employers to their roles as mentors and supervisors
- Help students communicate their support needs and strategies
- Help employers capitalize on students' learning styles and identify support strategies
- Communicate with students and employers on a regular basis
- Link work-based learning experiences to classroom learning and academic curriculum

Employer Responsibility in Work-Based Learning

- Model expectations
- Give clear, detailed, and repeated directions
- Communicate expectations for job performance, behavior, and social interactions
- Explain consequences for inappropriate behavior
- Identify the best methods of communication for each student
- Capitalize on each student's learning style and identify support strategies
- Discuss progress and improvements in performance
- Teach skills needed for successful job performance
- Communicate with students on a regular basis
- Communicate with school liaisons on a regular basis

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Wehman. P. (2001). *Life beyond the classroom: Transition strategies for young people with disabilities*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.

Print Resources

Hamilton, M., & Hamilton, S. (1997). *Learning well at work: Choices for quality*. New York, NY: Cornell University Press.

This guide is written for people in workplaces and schools that plan, direct, or evaluate work-based learning opportunities for youth.

Siegel, S., Robert, M., Greener, K., Meyer, G., Halloran, W., & Gaylord-Ross, R. (2003). *Career ladders: Transition from high school to adult life*. Austin, TX: PRO-ED, Inc.

This manual is designed to help special education teachers, counselors, and transition specialists connect students to the community, including workplaces.

Web Resources

Jobs for the Future (JFF)
http://www.jff.org/jff/

JFF seeks to accelerate the educational and economic advancement of youth and adults struggling in our economy.

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET)
Topic: Work Based Learning
http://www.ncset.org/topics/wblearning/default.asp?topic=19

This topic explores the benefits of providing youth with opportunities to learn at job sites in their communities through the use of workplace mentors, internships, combining community service with academic learning, and other strategies.

National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC)
http://www.nyec.org/

NYEC is a nonpartisan national organization dedicated to promoting policies and initiatives that help youth succeed in becoming lifelong learners, productive workers, and self-sufficient citizens.

Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE)
http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/index.html

The OVAE Web site has information, research, and resources to help prepare young people and adults for postsecondary education, successful careers, and productive lives.

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